

COMMENTARY

POWER, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND THE PROCESS OF FEMINIST RESEARCH

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The dismantling of a male-dominated “power-over” social structure and its manifestations in human activities and relationships lies at the center of feminist thought. For many feminist psychologists, this has meant challenging the privileged, all-knowing, objective position of the researcher; viewing the “naive subject” of study as a participant in the process of creating knowledge; and using research methods aimed at transforming an oppressive culture (Burman, 1992; Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Hollway, 1989). These goals are at the center of the Community Education Team’s (this issue) article: “Fostering Relationality When Implementing and Evaluating a Collective-Drama Approach to Preventing Violence Against Women.” The authors use the concept of relationality to describe the process of developing interdependence and an “egalitarian, democratic research relationship” among those involved in the study. Although “sharing power” is a goal of feminist research and pedagogy, detailed accounts of the process of incorporating feminist ideas regarding power relations in U.S. psychological research are rare. The Community Education Team reminds us that those ideas most central to feminist thought—power, process, and social change—are often the very ideas that still elude U.S. feminist psychological research.

SOCIAL CHANGE: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

I applaud violence-prevention research that expands its focus from changing individuals to changing systems that promote violence against women. Fifty years ago Kurt Lewin (1948), the “practical theorist” first introduced the idea of *action-research*.

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The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice. (p. 203)

Today we continue to celebrate Lewin's commitment to social change through the efforts of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. Yet, published research focusing on direct intervention in social problems in real-life situations continues to be surprisingly rare. Some of this research now falls under the rubric of applied and/or evaluation research, in contrast to "basic" psychological research, which focuses on the development of theory. Unfortunately, however, basic research often holds more status than applied research.

With the rise of feminist research in the 1970s came a renewed commitment to social change and a new focus on changing systems rather than individuals. Action-research took on new life as an "innovative" approach. The Community Education Team has made an important contribution to both the *tradition* of conducting socially responsible research and the *innovation* of achieving the feminist goal of ending violence against women. Labeling the authors' study as evaluation research risks losing valuable information about the "basic" processes involved in promoting social change in real-life situations—in this case, effective sexual-violence prevention efforts. Most sexual-violence prevention research translates into attitudinal outcome research that asks, "How can we change individuals' negative attitudes toward women or rape myths?" And although we know we can change peoples' attitudes in workshops, the changes are often temporary and narrow in scope (Lonsway, 1996; Mahlstedt, Falcone, & Rice-Spring, 1993). Research on effecting lasting change in male sexist behavior is limited. Also, Lonsway (1996) notes that we know absolutely nothing about the processes of change associated with sexual-violence prevention efforts. Knowledge about how individuals and groups experience the process of change is critical to developing effective prevention strategies. The work of the Community Education Team has provided an important step in that direction.

POWER AND PROCESS IN RELATIONALITY

Questions about power relations emerge from "Fostering Relationality." First, there is the perplexing problem of relationality, power, and equality among people of clearly different status and power positions. Is equality an achievable goal in hierarchically defined relationships? Can relationality occur without equality? How are these questions addressed by the Community Education Team? Second, I have concerns about the potential to universalize relationality while overlooking privilege. Would relationality look different within and among diverse groups based on race, social class, or sexuality?

Relationality, a conceptual framework designed to challenge the control typically held strictly by the primary researcher, is broadly defined to include interdependence, intersubjectivity, connectedness, mutuality, nonviolence, and social location. Embedded in this framework is the vexing problem of power and how to deal with "real" power differentials between people. In the beginning of their article, the

authors discuss their expectations of "egalitarian, democratic research relationships" (p. 98). They later explain the difficulties of maintaining equality in research relationships. Although *relationality* is not the same as equality, the authors seem to suggest that relationality can *result* in equality. Is this possible where explicit and/or implicit power differentials exist? Probably not. What does feminist psychology offer regarding concepts of power within a context of power differentials? Feminist inquiry into the dynamics of power has focused largely on uncovering the dynamics of male privilege and systems of domination. But what about the processes that occur when feminists design studies and consequently bring their multiple, intersecting positions of privilege to the role of researcher? We have only begun to understand what is required of us. Brinton Lykes' (1989) groundbreaking research with Guatemalan Indian women stands as a model of participatory research which the author calls "engaged collaboration" (p. 180). Through collaboration—ongoing dialogue, self-disclosure, and shared decision making—the research process reflected the interests of the researchers, participants, and each individual participant's community. Other feminist psychologists have addressed the subtle, complex ways power and privilege enter into the research process of information exchange and making meaning between interviewer and interviewee (Burman, 1991, 1992; Fine, 1992, 1994). These researchers challenge us to risk being vulnerable. Relinquishing control demands no less.

Concepts such as shared power, consensual decision making, and empowerment are central feminist discourses of power. Most feminists would likely agree that the goal of empowerment defined as "a process in which each participant enhances the other's feelings of competence and/or power" (Miller & Cummins, 1992, p. 417), guides their teaching and research, yet there is limited research that examines these processes. What does empowerment look like? How do we know when empowerment has been achieved? Is empowerment different from relationality? The classroom has been one of the primary contexts for discussions and documentation about feminist efforts to empower others (e.g., Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Similarly, within the context of a feminist research team, what does it mean to share power? What about the "primary" investigator who has more power or the team member who acquires more status within an empowerment model? Ironically, the concept of power, which lies at the core of feminist thought, has not been the primary focus of much research. This may be partly because this type of research requires methodologies that examine interactions between people and document processes, whereas psychology has primarily focused on measuring attributes of individuals.

The Community Education Team's analysis of the process of change reported by troupe members provides important insight into the concept of relationality and its impact on power differentials in a context of learning. Troupe members reported that "everything came from us. . . . We started from scratch and built it." Their experience of ownership was an active expression of their power. The quality of the dialogue also gave troupe members an experience of their power in the situation, for example, in the decision about how to end the date-rape scene. The authors note that "sensitivity to perspectives divergent from our own" and "avoiding polemical dichotomies" allowed them to develop a dialogue in which the actor in question could "engage his own process and to be respected for what he believed," which led to a shift in his thinking. They admit though that they would not have accepted

a script that was sympathetic to the date rapist. That is, they would have asserted their power. (At this point, I become confused. The authors acknowledge their "greater" power, yet still use the language of equality to explain this dimension of their research relationships.) The words of troupe members reflect their simultaneous knowledge that the facilitators "imposed limits" and at the same time gave the actors "the liberty to make our own limits for ourselves." Is that equality? Obviously not. The process meets the broader criteria of relationality and empowerment, however. Troupe members could accept the difference in power while at the same time maintaining a sense of their own control in the situation. "Fostering Relationality" contributes to and allows for necessary dialogue about the complexities of power. Their analysis of processes among people provides a means to begin understanding the negotiation of power relations.

PRIVILEGE AND RELATIONALITY

Many factors that the authors explain as facilitating relationality—use of participants' own words, feedback to participants, participants giving meaning to the data, participants setting the agenda—have long been core principles of conducting qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Reason & Rowan, 1981). Feminist qualitative research adds the dimension of recognizing the concepts of race, class, and heterosexual privilege. On the broadest theoretical level, I wonder about the role of privilege in determining the definition and behavioral characteristics of relationality. Does relationality require direct, verbal communication? Would relationality look the same among all people? Is relationality inclusive? Griscom (1992) notes that relational psychology in its original conception by Miller (1976/1986) did not deal with race and class distinctions. Although later developments addressed issues of race, Griscom explains that the basic theory still struggles with conceptualizing power inequalities related to difference and "has had difficulty in dealing with social structures" (p. 404).

The authors' definition of relationality addresses the individual's embeddedness in "human, social and historical contexts," as, for instance, "keeping reflection notes helps to account for investigators' social locations and personal subjectivity" (p. 101). Although the researchers accounted for their subjectivity with regard to its potential effects on the interpretation of information they collected, it is less clear that they closely analyzed the microlevel process of information exchange. That is, while the Community Education Team explained that participants influenced the direction of the interview and thereby exercised some structural control, an analysis of the language, through which power relations are partly constructed and negotiated, would provide additional understanding. This, of course, involves such methodologies as psycholinguistic and/or discourse analysis. Certainly, the collaborative approach used by the Community Education Team demonstrates the essential role of dialogue among researchers, and researchers and participants as one essential element in addressing power and privilege.

The Community Education Team has reminded us of the importance of closely examining the *process* of doing research, along with many dimensions: as a collaborative effort, as a means of social change, and as a way to understand power relations

within a hierarchical structure. More important, this reminder challenges us to demand that journals regularly support *innovative* feminist research through publication, and not only in special issues.

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